

DELEGATED OFFICER REPORT



WOKINGHAM
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Application Number:	242967
Site Address:	Wokingham Theatre, Twyford Road, Wokingham, RG40 5TU
Expiry Date:	19 April 2025
Site Visit Date:	09.05.2025
Proposal: Full application for the proposed erection of a two storey extension to form a studio block, plus the erection of a link between the main building and the storage barn (which is to be retained on a permanent basis); closure of the old access and creation of public parking spaces, formation of a new access and installation of hardstanding to form on-site parking.	

PLANNING CONSTRAINTS/STATUS

- Countryside
- Adjoins North Wokingham SDL to the north
- Visible from Green Route (Twyford and Milford Roads)
- AWE Burghfield consultation zone (special case zone)
- Flood Zone 1
- Nitrate vulnerable zone (surface water)
- Public open space (Cantley Park)
- Bat consultation zone
- Thames Basin Heath Special Protection Area (7km zone)
- Priority habitat (parkland in Cantley Park)
- Adjoins Local wildlife site (Cantley Park)
- Thames Water consultation zone
- Heathrow Aerodrome wind turbine safeguarding zone
- Non-classified road
- Adopted highway

PLANNING POLICY

National Policy	National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) National Planning Policy Guidance (NPPG)
Core Strategy 2010	Policy CP1 – Sustainable Development Policy CP2 – Inclusive Communities Policy CP3 – General Principles for Development Policy CP6 – Managing Travel Demand Policy CP7 – Biodiversity Policy CP8 – Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area Policy CP9 – Scale and Location of Development Proposals Policy CP11 – Proposals Outside Development Limits
Managing Development Delivery Local	Policy CC01 – Presumption in Favour of Sustainable Development Policy CC02 – Development Limits Policy CC03 – Green Infrastructure, Trees and Landscaping

Plan 2014	Policy CC04 – Sustainable Design and Construction Policy CC06 – Noise Policy CC07 – Parking Policy CC09 – Development and Flood Risk Policy CC10 – Sustainable Drainage Policy TB04 – Development in vicinity of Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE), Burghfield Policy TB08 – Open Space, Sport and Recreational Facilities Standards Policy TB21 – Landscape Character Policy TB23 – Biodiversity and Development
Other	Borough Design Guide Supplementary Planning Document CIL Guidance

PLANNING HISTORY

App No.	Description	Decision/Date
14961	New theatre building	Approved 4 July 1981
22160	New theatre building	Approved 20 September 1984
26500	Illuminated signage with logo	Approved 3 November 1986
42100	Workshop extension	Approved 15 March 1994
F/1999/69164	Front and two storey side extension	Approved 29 June 1999
F/2007/2722	Pedestrian improvements to Cantley Park	Approved 6 June 2008
F/2008/1693	Rear extension for rehearsal and dressing room	Approved 9 September 2008
F/2009/0172	Amendment to F/2008/1693	Approved 8 June 2009
EXT/2012/1172	Extension of F/2009/0172 for three years	Approved 13 August 2012 (not implemented)
163372	Internal/external alterations for backstage and rehearsal space, studio, public circulation and storage barn	Approved 15 June 2017
213162	Full application for temporary permission for the erection of a storage barn (part retrospective)	Approved, 21 October 2021

ENFORCEMENT HISTORY

RFS No.	Description	Decision/Date
2021/086612	Erection of barn in incorrect location	Closed 24 September 2021 following application

CONSULTATION RESPONSES

Internal

WBC Property Services – No comments received.
WBC Drainage – No objections, subject to conditions.
WBC Enforcement – No comments received.

WBC Highways – Further information requested.
 WBC Green Infrastructure – No comments received.
 WBC Landscape and Trees – No objections, subject to conditions.
 WBC Ecology Newts – No comments received.
 WBC Ecology – No comments received.

External

Thames Water Utilities Ltd – No comments received.
 South East Water – No comments received.

REPRESENTATIONS

Parish/Town Council	<u>The Wokingham Town Council P&T Committee</u> – Supports application.
Ward Member(s)	No comments received
Neighbours	<u>Cantley House H Milton Road:</u> The objection raises concerns about the lack of height details for the proposed building, potential impacts on views of the park and the rural setting, which are important to the objector's wedding venue business, and anticipated disruption from construction noise affecting hotel guests.

APPRAISAL

Site Description and Proposed Development:

Wokingham Theatre lies at the northern end of Wokingham, to the east of Twyford Road and within Cantley Park. Cantley Hotel adjoins to the east but the rest of the site comprises parkland and playing fields and tennis courts. It falls within designated countryside but North Wokingham SDL adjoins to the north.

Full application for the proposed erection of a two storey extension to form a studio block, plus the erection of a link between the main building and the storage barn (which is to be retained on a permanent basis); closure of the old access and creation of public parking spaces, formation of a new access and installation of hardstanding to form on-site parking.

The application seeks planning permission for the following works:

- The proposed erection of a two storey extension to form a studio block.
- Formation of a new access and installation of hardstanding to form on-site parking.
- The permanent retention of an existing storage barn.

Planning History and Context:

Planning permission 163372 granted approval for internal and external alterations to the existing Wokingham Theatre building, including a two storey and first floor

extensions to provide additional backstage space, rehearsal space, studio, public circulation areas and a new detached storage barn. However, this permission was only partially implemented, with internal works completed and the detached storage barn erected.

The barn was originally approved for the southern rear corner of the site but was instead constructed on the rear eastern side of the existing theatre, within the footprint of the proposed extensions. This revised location was later regularised under planning permission 213162, which granted temporary consent for a five-year period.

This current application seeks to override the unimplemented extensions approved under planning permission 163372 by proposing a new two-storey extension and the permanent retention of the storage barn and repositing the hard surfacing area for car parking approved under 213162.

Principle of Development:

The National Planning Policy Framework has an underlying presumption in favour of sustainable development which is carried through to the local Development Plan. The Managing Development Delivery Local Plan Policy CC01 states that planning applications that accord with the policies in the Development Plan for Wokingham Borough will be approved without delay, unless material considerations indicate otherwise.

The site is located outside of development limits, where Core Strategy Policy CP11 applies. Policy CP11 states that in order to protect the separate identity of settlements and maintain the quality of the environment, proposals outside of development limits will not normally be permitted except where:

- 1) It contributes to diverse and sustainable rural enterprises within the borough, or in the case of other countryside based enterprises and activities, it contributes and/or promotes recreation in, and enjoyment of, the countryside; and
- 2) It does not lead to excessive encroachment or expansion of development away from the original buildings; and

With respect to criterion 1, while the proposal does not constitute a rural enterprise nor directly promote recreation in the countryside in the traditional sense, it relates to Wokingham Theatre - a long-established, registered charitable organisation that contributes to cultural enrichment and public recreation *within* the countryside setting. Although the site lies outside defined settlement limits, the theatre has operated at this location since 1986 and is an established and valued community facility. As such, the proposed development would support the theatre's ongoing public and educational activities, enhancing opportunities for local participation in the arts. In this context, the development can be seen as contributing positively to the enjoyment of the countryside through accessible cultural engagement, and this can reasonably be afforded weight in the consideration of the application.

With regard to criterion 2, it is important to note that the principle of a two-storey extension in this location has already been established under planning permission

163372. A comparison between the approved elevations under that consent (Figure 1) and the current proposals (Figure 2) demonstrates that the overall bulk, scale and siting of the proposed development are broadly comparable. In fact, the omission of the previously approved western side extension results in a modest net reduction in overall volume.



Figure 1 – Previously approved elevational drawing of PA: 163372 showing the North Elevation (View from Cantley Park).

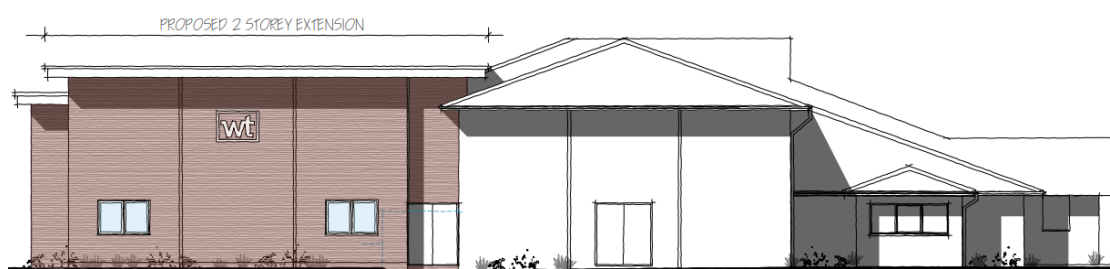


Figure 2 – Proposed elevational drawing showing the North Elevation (View from Cantley Park).

The proposed development, including the extension and retained storage barn, would be contained within the existing developed footprint of the site. The additional hardstanding would also be located immediately adjacent to the eastern elevation, avoiding any significant encroachment into the wider landscape. While the theatre site is compact, it is not located in close proximity to other buildings, and the proposed works would not push development significantly further into the surrounding parkland or countryside.

Although the site lies outside the defined settlement limits, it is closely bordered by existing and emerging development. The settlement boundary lies approximately 200 metres to the south, while the North Wokingham SDL is around 50 metres to the north and includes consented housing roughly 90 metres to the west. While the site is currently classed as countryside, this context—surrounded by present and future urban development—is a material consideration.

Therefore, it is considered that the proposals would not result in an excessive or unjustified spread of built form into the countryside. The limited scale of expansion, the established planning history, and the mix pattern of development in the surrounding area all contribute to a conclusion that the impact on the open character of the countryside would be minimal and not sufficient to justify refusal.

Policy TB16 requires that a sequential test is required for a proposal to locate a town centre leisure use of (including extensions) 500 sqm or above outside of the town centre. As such, the proposal would be expected to undertake a sequential test to demonstrate how it could not be accommodated in a sequentially preferable site - the Town Centre.

As previously established by the Case Officer's report under 163372, the existing theatre has occupied its purpose-built site at Cantley Park, within the countryside and outside the town centre, since 1986. It was accepted that no suitable or available alternative sites exist within the town centre to accommodate the theatre's needs. Although located in the countryside, the site sits between established settlement limits and the North Wokingham SDL, with surrounding development expected to improve site sustainability and access.

The proposal was found to deliver clear social and economic benefits by enhancing a valued charitable, cultural, and leisure facility. Environmental gains were also noted, including improved energy efficiency and potential access to sustainable transport. A community use agreement further supported its retention in this location.

While the theatre is a membership organisation, it actively engages the wider public and supports various community activities. The proposed expansion would enhance these contributions through additional rehearsal and storage space, helping sustain its role as an essential cultural facility. On balance, the development was considered appropriate and not harmful to the character of the countryside.

Overall, taking Policy CP11 and Policy TB16 into account, while the proposal involves a town centre use located outside of the town centre and within the countryside, the long-standing presence of the theatre at this site, the lack of any more suitably located alternatives, and its proximity to the North Wokingham SDL are all material considerations. Furthermore, the enhanced community access to cultural and leisure facilities strengthens its role as a valuable community asset. On balance, these benefits are considered to outweigh any associated harm, such that the proposal would not conflict with the aims of point 6 of Policy CP11 of the Core Strategy or Policy TB16 of the Managing Development Delivery Document. As such, refusal on these grounds would not be justified.

Character of the Area:

Policy CP3 of the Core Strategy states that development must be appropriate in terms of its scale, mass, layout, built form, height and character of the area and must be of high quality design.

Rural and non-residential guidelines in the Borough Design Guide SPD also apply, including RD1 and NR1, which requires that development contribute positively towards and be compatible with the historic or underlying character and quality of the local area and NR2, NR5, NR8 and NR9 requiring consideration of height, bulk, massing and materials.

While the proposed two-storey side extension would notably increase the scale and

massing of the building's eastern wing, it would still remain subordinate to the central core of the original theatre. As such, the extension maintains a balanced relationship with the host structure and avoids visually dominating the site. Moreover, as previously highlighted, the omission of the previously approved western side extension results in a modest net reduction in overall volume and massing of the building when viewed as a whole. Amended plans were also submitted and received by the agent on 27/03/2025 which includes openings across the main front elevation, architectural detailing to matching that on the existing building and a logo 'wt' to help assist in adding visual detail to the building. The use of matching materials would enable the proposal to integrate with the character of the existing property. As such, this element of the proposal would not adversely impact the character of the area.

The proposed permanent retention of the existing storage barn would not alter the character of the area, as the structure is already in place. Positioned towards the rear of the site, the barn would be largely screened from the street scene by the proposed two-storey side extension and existing landscaping along the eastern boundary. As such, its continued presence would not have an adverse impact on the visual character of the area.

The proposed hardstanding to facilitate car parking would be positioned discreetly to the side of the building, remaining within the confines of the existing built development. While it is acknowledged that a noticeable portion of grassed area would be lost, the overall visual impact can be mitigated through the implementation of an appropriate landscaping scheme. This would help soften the appearance of the proposals and ensure the development integrates more sympathetically with its surroundings. A suitable condition will be attached to any approval to secure these landscape enhancements.

Neighbouring Amenity:

The Cantley Hotel adjoins the site to the east and is the only neighbouring property. The proposed development would be positioned at a sufficient distance from this property, and existing screening—combined with the proposed layout—would ensure that no issues of overlooking, loss of light, or overbearing impact would arise.

Highway Access and Parking Provision:

The Council's Highways Officer has reviewed the application and notes that WBC Car Parking Standards do not explicitly address requirements for ancillary facilities of a theatre. As such, the applicant is asked to clarify whether the proposed extension would result in an increase in staff or audience numbers.

Under current standards, one parking bay is required per five additional auditorium seats. However, as the proposal does not include an increase in seating capacity, and instead primarily seeks to enhance storage provision, it is unlikely to generate a significant rise in parking demand.

Although the existing site does not currently benefit from formal on-site parking, the proposal includes the creation of seven parking bays. This exceeds the minimum requirement for the proposed side extension and would bring the benefit of additional

dedicated parking provision. The existing arrangement, where theatre patrons make use of car parks within Cantley Park, would continue. The new on-site provision would assist in meeting any additional demand generated by the enhanced theatre and associated community use.

Accordingly, the proposed parking provision is considered adequate and would help minimise the risk of overspill parking on surrounding roads, thereby supporting highway safety and user convenience.

Flooding and Drainage:

The proposed development is located within Flood Zone 1, as identified by Environment Agency mapping, and is therefore at low risk of fluvial flooding. However, the Council's Drainage Officer has noted that no information has been provided regarding the existing or proposed surface water drainage arrangements. As a result, it has been recommended that a condition be imposed requiring full details of the site's surface water drainage system to be submitted and approved prior to the commencement of development. Given the significant increase in impermeable surfaces resulting from the proposed side extension and hardstanding, it is considered both reasonable and necessary to include such a condition to ensure that the development does not increase the risk of surface water flooding either on the site or in the surrounding area.

Landscape and Trees:

The site is located within Cantley Park on the rural edge of Wokingham, within designated countryside. Access is via Twyford Road, which forms part of a Green Route Enhancement Area. The site lies within a Habitat Priority Area characterised by parkland and scattered trees, and to the south is the Cantley Park Local Wildlife Site. A row of hornbeam trees is situated to the west of the building, with additional trees to the east, located behind a close-boarded fence. While there are no protected trees immediately surrounding the building, several trees in the area have been identified as veteran specimens by the Wokingham District Veteran Tree Association. In addition, there are protected trees along Twyford Road adjacent to the site.

The development is proposed adjacent to the eastern side of the existing theatre building, in proximity to trees set back from both the eastern and southern boundaries of the site.

Although the tree survey and plans include the trees to the west of the site, tree protection measures have only been proposed for those to the east and south, as detailed in Drawing No. LAS 844 02 dated 15.10.24 – Tree Protection Plan. At this stage, no details have been provided regarding the potential location of a site hut, materials storage, or other construction phase operations. This information will be required as part of a Construction Environmental Management Plan (CEMP). If such areas cannot be accommodated away from the western part of the site, the existing tree protection measures may need to be reviewed and extended accordingly.

No tree removals or other tree works are proposed as part of this application. A minor encroachment into the Root Protection Area (RPA) of Tree T1 (an oak) is anticipated

due to the new car parking area. The Arboricultural Consultant advises this will be achieved by peeling back the existing turf adjacent to the tree. However, further detail is required regarding the proposed surfacing. It is expected that a no-dig solution using a cellular confinement system (e.g. CellWeb) with an appropriate porous surface will be utilised. This must be confirmed in an updated Arboricultural Method Statement, which should be secured via a planning condition.

There is also potential for new landscaping around the altered setting of the building, including turf reinstatement and the formation of planting beds beneath existing trees on the eastern boundary. As these areas fall within RPAs, the soft landscaping specification should include careful cultivation methods to avoid root disturbance. Details of this, along with planting proposals for other areas of the site, should also be provided.

The Trees and Landscape Officer raises no objection to the proposals but advises that careful consideration must be given to the location of construction-related infrastructure (e.g. site huts and storage), which may necessitate additional protective fencing on the western side of the site.

Biodiversity Net Gain:

As of 2nd April 2024, a 10% Biodiversity net gain (BNG) for minor developments is required under a statutory framework introduced by Schedule 7A of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (inserted by the Environment Act 2021). This can be achieved through either on-site or off-site mitigation.

Under the statutory framework for biodiversity net gain, subject to some exceptions, every grant of planning permission is deemed to have been granted subject to the condition that the biodiversity gain objective is met ("the biodiversity gain condition").

The biodiversity gain condition is a pre-commencement condition: once planning permission has been granted, a Biodiversity Gain Plan must be submitted and approved by the planning authority before commencement of the development.

The Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) metric submitted with this application (prepared by John Wenman Ecological Consultancy, Ref: R2783_BNG_a) demonstrates that achieving the statutory minimum 10% net gain in biodiversity on-site is feasible within the scope of the proposed development. The assessment indicates a total net increase of 12.55% in habitat units and 20.53% in hedgerow units. Given the scale of the scheme, these on-site enhancements, along with their ongoing management and monitoring, can be appropriately secured through a suitably worded planning condition.

Ecology:

The site is located in habitat which matches where bat roosts have previously been found in the borough and is located within a red zone for great crested newts which are highly suitable habitat and are the most important areas for great crested newts.

Bats

The supporting Preliminary Ecological Appraisal (John Wenman Ecological Consultancy LLP, November 2024, ref: R2783_PEA_a) found no evidence of bats

during the internal and external inspections of the property and concludes that the potential for roosting bats is deemed to be very low. As such, the proposals are unlikely to adversely affect roosting bats or other protected species.

Great crested newts

The supporting Preliminary Ecological Appraisal concluded that Great crested newts are considered unlikely to be present on the site due to the absence of breeding habitat, limited suitability of onsite terrestrial habitats, and no records in close proximity. While there is a low risk they may opportunistically use some scrub areas, appropriate mitigation and precautionary measures during construction will ensure their protection. A suitable condition will be attached to any approval.

Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL):

When planning permission is granted for a development that is CIL liable, the Council will issue a liability notice as soon as practicable after the day on which the planning permission first permits development. Completing the assumption of liability notice is a statutory requirement to be completed for all CIL liable applications.

The Public Sector Equality Duty (Equality Act 2010):

In determining this application the Council is required to have due regard to its obligations under the Equality Act 2010. The key equalities protected characteristics include age, disability, gender, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief. There is no indication or evidence (including from consultation on the application) that persons with protected characteristics as identified by the Act have or will have different needs, experiences, issues and priorities in relation to this particular planning application and there would be no significant adverse impacts as a result of the development.

RECOMMENDATION

Conditions agreed:	Yes
Recommendation:	Approval
Date:	15 April 2025
Earliest date for decision:	12 January 2025

Recommendation agreed by: (Authorised Officer)	<i>MC</i>
Date:	01.05.2025